

AN ETHER "VISION."

BY FREDERICK HALL.

THIS is an account, set down as accurately as possible, of the one strange mental experience in my life of thirty-six years.

It occurred on the fourteenth of last April, while under the influence of an anesthetic preceding a surgical operation, and I find it especially strange in that it happened to *me*, who had always regarded myself as psychologically entirely average and commonplace. I have never been accused or suspected of possessing mediumistic powers, have never been hypnotized, have never had a "premonition," am not "nervous," never saw a ghost and, to quote the author of *The Purple Cow*, "I never hope to see one." My occupation (I am a country store keeper) has, so far as I am aware, never been regarded as predisposing a man to see visions and dream dreams. Moreover my knowledge of either philosophy or psychology is such as has been gathered only from general reading and casual conversations.

The operation in question was performed by a surgeon whom I met for the first time in the operating room, assisted by Dr. K., a relative, and Dr. H., a personal friend. My recollections of *events* have been corroborated by the physicians; my sensations were as I shall describe them except that I am not positive as to their exact order.

I had never before taken ether, but the odor was not to me disagreeable. I began breathing deeply and regularly, as directed; I felt the pressure of the nurse's fingers on my pulse and then Dr. H., with whom I had often discussed the mysteries of life and death, said:

"This change coming over you is like another which you and I will some time experience."

And he laughed softly as I answered:

"We'll talk about it some day."

A few moments later he asked:

"Getting sleepy?"

"A little," I answered and, later, as I felt the drowsiness creeping over me, I added:

"I'm asleep now from the waist down."

I realized that the drug was having its effect, that I must soon pass entirely under its influence, but the sensation was far from unpleasant. It was as if I were drifting with a great resistless tide, out into a rest which in its vastness might be eternal, a sort of Buddhistic Nirvana, in entering which I felt no sorrow, no regret.

Then (and of the nature of the transition I have no memory) I was all at once awake and fully conscious in a different world, perhaps (one of the physicians later suggested) that of the subjective mind—whatever that may be. At any rate, it gave no sensory impressions, neither touch, smell or sight, yet in it I felt myself perfectly at home and immediately recognized it as being far more *real* than the other world out of which I had just come. Entering it was, by comparison, like coming out of the murky shadows of a cave into the clear light of day; like passing at a step from the din and clangor of a crowded city street into the quiet of a country roadside on a summer afternoon.

The physicians believed me entirely unconscious and I had lost all control of my members, as well as all concern for them, when suddenly, as if from a far distance, though I knew that he stood just at my body's head, I heard the voice of Dr. H. saying:

"Keep breathing, Fred. Breathe deep."

Response was instantaneous and seemingly almost automatic. I drew two breaths so deep that my back quite lifted, they tell me, from the operating table and of these breaths I was conscious.

Then I heard Dr. K. laugh softly and say:

"He still knows how to mind well."

At that they say I chuckled. I do not remember it, but I do know that I was at that moment supremely amused, for I realized that these, my friends, believed they saw real things and causes, the cause, for example of my breathing, of their talking, and the like. But they *didn't*; and I did. Not in the sense of being wiser than they or exercising keener insight. Only, I was where the causes *were* and to see them required no more mental effort or ability than to recognize a color as blue or an odor as ammonia.

It is this phase of my experience which I find hardest to describe. It was as real as anything I ever experienced in physical life. It has still for me a very definite and positive value: since my waking there have risen a score of subtle mental problems which I have felt (still feel indeed) would simply vanish could they be looked at in

the light of that world, yet when I seek to picture it, it escapes like water from every form of words I fashion and in telling of it I realize not simply that I fail to enlighten my individual hearer but that the words themselves are such as could not be expected to carry any clear impression to any one who had not undergone a similar experience.

This much however by way of one more trial:

I was, in the phrase of one of Jack London's heroes, "all there." I had no dread of pain; so far as I was concerned the surgeons might have begun their work that moment; yet, although I did not see or feel it in the physical sense, I knew just where my body lay, knew I had been placed under the influence of ether and was to undergo an operation. I was as conscious as at any time I ever was of my personal affection for Drs. K. and H., and in my amusement there was no feeling of contempt or of superiority. I knew they saw all any one in their position could see, and, standing where I did, would see all I saw. But the knowledge of how little they actually did see, coupled with their evident feeling that they saw all there *was*, this was funny to the last degree; as funny as the remark of the Irishman who, shown for the first time a barometer, exclaimed: "An' who'd iver think a little machine loike thot could make it rain an' snow!"

In no wise either was my amusement due to a feeling that Dr. H. supposed that he was making me do something which actually I did of my own volition. In one sense he *did* make me breathe: not, as it seems to me, that he had any real control over *me*, but rather that my own control over my own body was so relaxed that I could not prevent his taking charge of the machine: though, for that matter, I had of course no wish to do so.

As to the causes operating in my world, they seemed not such as to at all supersede individual agency. Physical speech, physical breathing, and all the rest, were true, so far as they went, but my feeling was of their comparative unimportance and superficiality. It was as if the physical phenomena were but the echoes, or better perhaps, the broken and distorted shadows of the real things passing on my side of the veil. There one saw them as through a glass darkly, but here face to face.

'Tis a crude figure but I felt that those of the physical world knew as little of real causes as does the child who, viewing a passing train and noting its revolving wheels, supposes that they, turning of themselves, give to coaches and locomotive their momentum. Or (another figure) imagine a man seated in a boat, surrounded by

dense fog and out of the fog seeing a flat stone leap from the crest of one wave to another. *If he had always sat thus*, his explanations must be very crude as compared with those of a man whose eyes could pierce fog and who saw upon the shore the boy skipping stones.

In some such way the remarks of the two physicians seemed to me like the last two "skips" of a stone thrown from my side and they enlightened me not at all except as to the manner in which the cause, if I may so phrase it, worked itself out. All that was essential in the remark I knew before it was made.

Yet thus to discover, convincingly and for myself, that the things which are unseen are those of real importance, this was sufficiently stimulating and it will show how fully I was myself when I say that at the moment the last remark was made there flashed through my mind a conversation with a friend in which he, speaking of God as the great immanent spirit, in whom we live and move and have our being, suggested that God could perfectly control all phenomena, yet leave us infallibly convinced that what we saw resulted from natural law and natural law only. Not that this explanation quite fitted the case, not that I had any feeling of God, in the theological sense, but the very atmosphere of this world spoke to me of the oneness and rightness of all things.

"And," thought I, "I must remember all this and, when I return, must tell him how shrewd a guess he made." For, alas! the thought that I would not be able to tell clearly all that was then so plainly evident, this was to me inconceivable.

Afterward a drowsiness stole back upon me. I remembered having once read that the ears were the last part of a man to fall asleep, and I made a mental note as to the correctness of the statement. "For," said I, "I can still hear the running water in the other room."

The thought of my wife and children came last, and then I was quite gone, into realms which have left upon the plates of memory no record.

I have a notion, though it is only a guess, that most of the other sensations might also have escaped me had it not been for the two remarks of the physicians, serving as links, as it were, to join for me the two worlds and give me a momentary insight into each.

Oddly enough, I woke with no recollection of this to me unique experience. Not until some twenty hours later did it come to me, and then it came with the force of an obsession, clamorously demanding, as it still demands, to be clothed with adequate words.

One haunting enigma is the question of getting back. I was *there* once and were it Mombassa, Bagdad, Mandalay or "farthest north," any obscure or hidden corner of our planet, I would at least know how to *start* to reach it. But how set forth in quest of this realm which has for men an interest so much greater?

The doctors gave me little hope that ether would take me there again,* though I would willingly undergo all that was disagreeable in the waking could I only come back with communicable impressions. To return simply to *be* there, as an opium eater might long to enter again his paradise, for this I have no desire.

The besetting task was not well suited to the mind of a convalescent and all that day, as I tried to frame the story of what had been to me so real and vivid, there grew upon me, more and more, the feeling that I, like the Lazarus of Browning's "Epistle," had indeed entered "the spiritual life, around the earthly life," yet must also sympathize with him in that I could not give my "neighbor the real ground" of my conviction.

Now was it simply an hallucination, such stuff as dreams are made of?

It may have been. That, of course, I must admit; but that it was, mere argument or logic would never convince me.

All of us feel, sometimes, I imagine, that there *ought* to be a world different from and better than this one; some "home of the soul," where the scales always weigh true, where life's injustices and inequalities are squared, where the oppressor's wrongs, the proud man's contumely and all the rest are quite impossible, where we are quit, once and for all, of this world's "measureless grossness and the slag."

My feeling is that for a moment I stood on the borderland of such a world, was *there*, in a sense as real as that I now am here. I did not tarry, it is true; some spiritual current swept me forth again. But, if that world should prove to be all that my Pisgah glimpse seemed to promise, and if at death I were to return thither, to become a citizen of that country, I would ask for myself or for my loved ones no better realization of the Christians' Heaven.

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On reading the proofs of what I have written, it has occurred to me to mention two further items in connection with my experience.

* Prof. William James writes me however: "You would doubtless get something similar if you tried ether again."

In a recent newspaper account of a communication received through a medium by Professor Hyslop, from the spirit of his father, the "spirit" in explaining certain things which it understood better than he did said: "We see the working mind." In a sense this phrase seems to describe what I saw.

Also, this illustration has suggested to me the difficulty which I have in making clear to others what I underwent. Suppose that from the beginning the race of men had never seen in the physical sense but had somehow gotten on by the aid of the other four senses, increased and multiplied and won a certain measure of dominion over the earth, and then suppose that on some afternoon *one* of them had, for a brief space, seen in the sense in which we see, would it not be almost impossible for him to make clear to his fellow men what he had experienced? Would he have any words in which to tell it?

This is somewhat my feeling of helplessness.

EDITORIAL COMMENT.

This interesting report of the ether vision experienced by Mr. Frederick Hall, of Dundee, Illinois, describes a dream in which the dreamer remains to some extent conscious of his surroundings.

There are other cases which throw light on the experience of Mr. Hall, and are especially interesting because, as a rule, the dreams are taken by the dreamers to be real, and so they are inclined to call it "dreaming true." This seems to be corroborated because some features of the dream are due to actual sense-impressions and correspond to facts. For all that the experience remains a dream and the assumed actuality is an illusion quite natural in a dream.

One instance of this kind, communicated to me by a man of good education, was a case in which the dreamer dreamed that his soul passed out of his body, hovered above it and saw his own body lying on the bed quietly breathing. It saw doctors and nurses passing in and out and actually believed that he, his own soul without corporeal shape, an indefinite being consisting merely of self-consciousness, was perched in a definite place near the ceiling in the room.

Phenomena of this kind are not uncommon, and we may state that Professor Goltz, the famous physiologist of Strassburg, experienced conditions of this kind.

The present statement of Mr. Hall is the more interesting in

that he gives the account in the full belief that his dream was a reality, and he makes his statements from this standpoint in which he interprets his experiences in the dream itself. The physiological phenomena of his cerebration are those of a dream, but the psychical sensation of dreams is the same in kind as sense-perception in a waking state. Under normal conditions, dreams are weaker, but sometimes the dream consciousness, especially if it is caused by narcotics, proves to be as strong as, or even stronger and brighter, than the normal waking consciousness, rising up to a pitch of ecstasy, to a state of psychic intoxication when the soul revels in raptures of jubilant joy.

The subjective states of perception are realities of life, and as sensations are as real as in our waking consciousness. They are not real, however, and we call them hallucinations, in the sense that no outside or objective things correspond to the visions of the dream that are caused subjectively by internal causes, while the perceptions of the waking consciousness are caused by external or objective conditions which are independent of our subjectivity and exhibit a persistence which becomes absurd in dreams.

The interpretation of visions as objective realities is a psychical fact which must not be overlooked or forgotten, for it explains much in the psychical development of mankind and sets forth the reason why visions play such an important part in the history of religion.